

PASTORAL COUNSELING WITH THE DYING AND BEREAVED

**A Project
Presented to
the Faculty of the
School of Theology at Claremont**

**In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Ministry**

**by
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | PAGE |
|---|------|
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | iii |
| CHAPTER | |
| I. INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| Purpose | 2 |
| Organization of Remainder of Dissertation | 3 |
| II. PAUL'S MESSAGE ABOUT EXISTENTIAL ANXIETY: AN EXEGESIS OF THE BOOK OF ROMANS, CHAPTER 7 | 5 |
| Romans 7:1-6 | 6 |
| Romans 7:7-13 | 8 |
| Romans 7:14-25 | 10 |
| Conclusion | 11 |
| III. PASTORAL COUNSELING AND THE DYING PERSON | 14 |
| The Pastor's Unique Role | 16 |
| The Dying Person's Response to Death | 17 |
| The Use of Supportive Counseling | 20 |
| Truth-telling | 22 |
| Five Stages of Dying | 25 |
| Conclusion | 32 |
| IV. PASTORAL COUNSELING WITH THE BEREAVED | 34 |
| Four Stages of Grief | 35 |
| Practical Functions of the Pastor in Counseling the Bereaved | 39 |

| CHAPTER | PAGE |
|---|------|
| Considerations in Grief Counseling | 41 |
| Conclusion | 43 |
| V. THE FORGOTTEN CHILD | 45 |
| Explaining Death to Children | 47 |
| The Meaning of Death to Children | 48 |
| Children and the Funeral | 49 |
| Conclusion | 52 |
| VI. THE FUNERAL: NECESSARY OR OBSOLETE? | 53 |
| Rites of Passage | 53 |
| Changing Social Customs | 54 |
| Importance of the Christian Funeral | 58 |
| Functions of the Pastor in the Funeral Service | 59 |
| Conclusion | 62 |
| VII. DEVELOPMENT OF A STUDY GROUP ON DEATH AND GRIEF IN THE LOCAL CHURCH | 65 |
| Importance of a Study Group | 65 |
| Establishment of a Study Group at St. Paul's United Methodist Church | 67 |
| Outline for Class Sessions | 68 |
| Evaluation of the Study Group | 71 |
| VIII. CONCLUSION | 75 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 76 |
| APPENDIX | 81 |

The purpose of this paper is to examine the functions of the pastor in counseling with the dying and bereaved. It is important for the pastor to understand the dynamics of death on individual lives, for he/she has the unique opportunity to work not only with the dying person, but also with members of the family.

Because of a lack of understanding about the feelings a dying person may experience, some pastors are hesitant to counsel with the dying person. Recent studies have provided insights into the problems faced by the dying person and the benefits to be gained by counseling with him/her. If the pastor understands not only his/her own feelings about death but also the feelings the dying person may be experiencing, he/she will be able to counsel more effectively.

There is a reluctance on the part of many pastors to enter into intense long-term grief counseling. Sermons must be written, meetings attended, and other pastoral functions completed. However, the pastor can provide the supportive relationship needed in which the bereaved person works through grief. This will benefit the pastor, the dying person and members of the family, including children.

One of the most difficult tasks facing a bereaved person is explaining death to a child. The anxieties of an adult invariably surface when trying to share their feeling with the child. It is best to be honest and truthful, and admit that an adult does not always have all the answers. The adult, then, should indicate that he/she will explore the answers about death together with the child.

The pastor has the opportunity to use the funeral service not

only as a "rite of passage" but also as a meaningful experience to help persons in their grief. The funeral is both a memorial to the dead and a worship experience for the living. If it is done in a sensitive and caring manner, the funeral service helps to reestablish broken relationships, reaffirm the value of life, acknowledge the supportive community and represent a caring God.

Finally, the pastor can develop a study group within the local church which will enable persons to share common concerns about death. The church is uniquely equipped to provide this opportunity and the pastor can facilitate the expression of concerns about death and dying. This study group can be the foundation of continuing support to persons who face death and need to work through grief.

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Death is the great rupturer. Since man first appeared on earth, death has been the constant companion and ultimate threat. The question, 'Why should man die?' has traditionally been answered in Western Society within the framework of sacred doctrine.¹

The reality of death has always presented both a profound mystery and curse in life. From the most primitive to the most sophisticated culture, each individual has had to cope with death. However, it seems that many people conceive death as the ultimate catastrophe because they find it difficult to live with their own finiteness.

Twentieth century man prides himself on his ability to control his world. While he has exhibited substantial mastery over his physical and social environments, he cannot control his own death. He is able to delay it and reduce its misery, but all his cleverness and ingenuity has thus far been of no avail in eliminating it.²

Contemporary American society is now undergoing a change in attitudes toward death. Many Americans no longer view death as a result of divine happening, but as an unforeseen accident.

¹Earl Grollman, *Explaining Death to Children* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), p. 31.

²Richard Dumont and Dennis Foss, *The American View of Death* (Cambridge: Schenkman, 1972), p. 1.

Death is now a temporal matter that man treats much as he would avoid illness, or physical stigma. . . . Death, like a noxious disease, has become a taboo subject to American Society, and as such is the object of much avoidance, denial and disguise.³

Our attitude toward dying directly affects our view of life. During the past few years a greater awareness of death and its effect on a person's life has been brought to the attention of the general public and to the counseling professions.

Though every man will attempt in his own way to postpone such questions and issues until he is forced to face them, he will only be able to change things if he can start to conceive of his own death. This cannot be done on a mass level. This cannot be done by computers. This has to be done by every human being alone.⁴

PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is to examine the functions of the pastor in counseling with the dying and the bereaved and to describe the establishment of a study group within the local church enabling persons to share common feelings and personal experiences about death.

The chapters which follow give more details about the pastor's role in the counseling situations arising from death, the need for the funeral, and the study group established at St. Paul's United Methodist Church.

³Grollman, p. 32.

⁴Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), p. 8.

ORGANIZATION OF REMAINDER OF DISSERTATION

Chapter II is an exegesis of Chapter 7 of Paul's letter to the Romans. It concerns the Law versus faith and how it affects a person's life. The existential anxiety confronting contemporary society, because of alienation, loneliness and despair, is overcome when Paul proclaims that faith in God through Jesus Christ is a person's salvation. Through faith a person is no longer alone, but is affirmed in a supportive community which is symbolized by the pastor and the church.

Chapter III explores the role of the pastor in counseling with the dying person and the use of supportive counseling techniques based on the five stages of dying as reported by Kübler-Ross.

Chapter IV concerns pastoral counseling with the family and their adjustment to death. The members of the family face a new reality in their lives and need help from friends, the pastor and the supportive community within the church.

Chapter V describes the special dynamics of grief for children. Children are very much involved in bereavement, yet they are probably the most overlooked members of the family. The pastor and family have a responsibility to help them understand death and its effect on their lives.

Chapter VI examines the purposes of the funeral service and its use as grief therapy as well as last rites for the deceased.

Chapter VII records the development of a study group within the local church in order to provide an effective ministry with its laity and to minister to the bereaved. The format for such a study

group at St. Paul's United Methodist Church in Redondo Beach, California, and the evaluation of the group is included in this chapter.

Chapter II

PAUL'S MESSAGE ABOUT EXISTENTIAL ANXIETY:

AN EXEGESIS OF THE BOOK OF ROMANS, CHAPTER 7

The historical position of Paul may be stated as follows: Standing within the frame of Hellenistic Christianity, he raised the theological motifs that were at work in the proclamation of the Hellenistic Church to the clarity of theological thinking; he called to attention the problems latent in the Hellenistic proclamation and brought them to a decision; and thus so far as our sources permit an opinion on the matter-- became the founder of Christian theology.¹

Paul's Letter to the Romans is addressed to the Christians in Rome. Paul did not establish the Roman church; however, he was aware of its importance to the Christian faith. In preparation for his arrival to Rome, Paul wrote the letter from Corinth concerning the admission of Gentiles into the Christian church. Paul states clearly what he believes to be the center of the controversy.

Almost everywhere, Gentile Christians are being accepted into the Church on the same terms as Jewish Christians, and the Gentiles are not expected to take on themselves obedience to the ceremonial requirements of the Jewish Law--the principal requirement was circumcision.²

The Letter to the Romans should be treated as a letter, and not as a complete theological treatise on the nature of Christian beliefs. However, it does give insight into the significant problems

¹Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), I, 187.

²Ernest Best, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans* (Cambridge: University Press, 1967), p. 7.

confronting both Paul and the early church. This letter influenced the thinking of Luther and Calvin who drew their inspiration and theological understanding from it. Paul's Letter to the Romans continues to confront the church in its requirements of membership, theological understanding, and purpose of existence.

Chapter 7 concerns a person's liberation from the Law. Karl Barth states that "We have been liberated from this Law, yea dead to that Law. That is what the chapter actually says, and what we find contained in the first part (7:1-6) and confirmed from the last (7:24-25)."³ This chapter contains the best explanation of the psychology of sin and the problem of existential anxiety. Paul does not end his letter in despair, but in a bold proclamation of a faith in God through Jesus Christ.

ROMANS 7:1-6

Do you not know, brethren--for I am speaking to those who know the Law--that the Law is binding on a person only during his life? Thus a married woman is bound by law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies she is discharged from the Law concerning the husband.

Accordingly she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.

Likewise my brethren, you have died to the law, through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God.

³Karl Barth, *A Shorter Commentary on Romans* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1959), p. 74.

While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death.

But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code, but in the new life of the spirit.⁴

Romans 7:1-5 begins with the assertion the Law governs the living person. A person's death annuls all his obligations to others as well as all of the obligations of others to him. By this statement Christians were proclaimed free from the Law.

Paul is not dealing with Pagans for whom this question would be of no consequence or unintelligible, but with a community at whose worship the Old Testament was regularly read as the Word of God. To take the responsibility of saying that Christians are free from the Law--from God's Law. This certainly is no light or safe matter. . . . First Paul tries to make his thesis understood and to prove it by way of a simile. He chooses an example from marriage law to make it clear that the Law has no validity, no binding power beyond death.⁵

This simile raises many questions which make it vulnerable. There are other legal maxims in the Old Testament, which assert the opposite (i.e., the Law's binding power beyond death).

The simile is faulty in that there, first of all, one person is set free by the death of the other, here however, by his own death; and then, also, so far as there the dying person and the survivor are always different persons, here they are the same. Yet the question of binding and loosing also cannot be grasped through any human comparisons.⁶

Paul is asserting that previously each person was bound to

⁴All biblical quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from RSV 1959 edition.

⁵Emil Brunner, *The Letter to the Romans* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959), p. 56.

⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 56-57.

the Law, but is now bound to the living Christ. He indicates in 2 Cor. 3:1-6 that the written Law kills because it is impersonal, but the spiritual Law within the heart lives. The Jews believed that the written Law could help persons to attain the new life; instead it really evoked sinful passions.

Man bound to the law produced the 'fruit of death,' a man bound to Christ, the 'fruit of life.' It is not as if the Law were to be made responsible for sin--this conclusion Paul decisively rejects in the next section; but where sin once it, there the Law can be effective only in the sense that it evokes and intensifies this more than ever. . . . It is therefore, so to speak, a twofold death which we die in the baptism of Christ; a dying to sin, and a dying to the Law. These three entities belong together in a mysterious way; they are as it were, one and the same form: Sin, Law, and Death. Thus to be set free from one is also simultaneously a deliverance from the others; equally the liberation from one can only take place if the deliverance from the two others also happens. Without the liberation from the Law there is no deliverance from sin and death.⁷

In the first six verses of Romans, Paul states that the binding of the Law has been set free by the death of Jesus Christ for the old has passed away, and the new has arrived. According to Paul, the old Law is bound to slavery, and in the new Christ is freedom.

ROMANS 7:7-13

Paul continues his discourse about Law and Sin.

What then shall we say? That the Law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.'

⁷Ibid., p. 57.

But sin, finding opportunity in the same commandment, wrought in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law, sin lies dead.

I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died.

The very commandment which promised life proved to be death to me.

For sin, finding opportunity in the commandment deceived me and it killed me.

So the law is holy and the commandment is holy and just and good.

Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin working death in me through what is good in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.

In these verses, Paul rejects any suggestion that the Law is sinful, for the Law is indeed God's; therefore, it is holy, just, and good. The Law is ineffective because the Law cannot bring salvation. Salvation is attained by faith in the living Christ.

The reason why man's situation under the law is so desperate is not that the law has an inferior revelation mediates a limited or even a false knowledge of God. What makes his situation so desperate is the simple fact that prior to faith there is no true fulfillment to the law.⁸

Because each person tried to keep the Law, it bound him or her to sin because each person cannot find salvation by his or her own strength. This insight determines Paul's teaching about sin. Each person should not be allowed to imagine that he or she is able to produce salvation by adherence to the Law. Each person can find salvation only upon accepting his or her dependence upon God, the creator.

⁸Bultmann, I, 262-263.

Verses 7 through 13 expand upon the Law that each person is sinful in his or her desire or attempts to observe the Law.

Sin is actually God's intention: 'Law came (between Adam and Christ) to increase the trespass'; and the continuation shows what meaning that has; 'but where sin increased grace abounded all the more.' thus the law leads into sin the man who has forsaken his creaturely relation to God and wants to procure life for and by himself; it does this in order thereby to bring him back again to the right relation to God. This it does by confronting him with the grace of God which is to be appropriated in faith.⁹

The Law fulfills a divine purpose, for it makes each person aware of sin. Without this knowledge there can be no faith. God uses the Law to show himself to be holy, just, and good.

ROMANS 7:14-25

We know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin.

I do not understand my own actions, for I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. So then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me.

For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.

Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.

For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members.

⁹ Ibid., I, 265.

Wretched man that I am. Who will deliver me from this body of death?

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then I of myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.

In these verses Paul is crying from the depths of despair as most people do. People are constantly being torn between flesh and spirit, sin and forgiveness, life and death. Paul, in reality, speaks for all of mankind in his personal quest to find God.

In Romans 7, however, the broad vistas of the Adam-Christ idea are apparently abandoned and narrowed down to the experiences of an 'I.' To this very day the passage is often taken as biographical. . . . In reality, the 'I' in Romans 7, represents man without Christ subject to the law, sin and death, in an extremity which of course can be measured only in the light of the gospel. That Paul now so suddenly speaks in the first person and not abstractly and generally in the third person, about man or even Adam is, of course, significant. The reason is that what a man really is is revealed to him only when he understands himself not merely as a member of society (mankind) but in his own personal existence, and therefore affected in his own person.¹⁰

While Paul leads each person through despair, this chapter does not end there, for faith is affirmed in the praise, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:25) In these words lies the assurance that we are not alone. God is our deliverer from the depths of despair leading to the heights of hope.

CONCLUSION

St. Paul's letter to the Romans indicates strict obedience to

¹⁰Gunther Bornkamm, *Paul* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 125.

the law does not produce salvation. The Law is not a substitute for faith. Faith is the assurance that though this life may end, life is eternal because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are saved through faith in Christ, and it is this hope for eternal life through this resurrection that makes death bearable, or even explainable. Otherwise we are caught in a complete existential anxiety about our existence.

Paul's own faith did not prevent personal suffering from the anxieties and fears associated with death, but Paul interjects into man's life the emotional relief from the finality of death through faith in Jesus Christ. Despair is the universal cry of all humanity and this affirmation of life through Christ makes life more meaningful, and death the way into a new life of immortality.

Paul's letter to the Romans can give insight into the role of the pastor when working with the dying and bereaved. They sometimes feel guilty, alienated and alone because of broken relationships with loved ones. During this time of "reaching out" the pastor can give support to the dying and bereaved in working through these deep feelings. This can be achieved by sharing personal faith, rituals, prayers and sacraments of the church.

Paul states, "I do not understand my own actions, for I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate . . . Wretched man I am, who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" Hopefully, the pastor can help the dying and bereaved work through the same anxiety which confronted

Paul. The pastor represents God's presence during this time of need by showing love, care, concern and support.

Chapter III

PASTORAL COUNSELING AND THE DYING PERSON

The pastor is often viewed as a physical representative of the reality of God and the dynamic power of faith in action. Apart from his or her own being as a person, the pastor is often a symbol to others of the caring and compassionate listener called upon to assist in many crises, including death and dying. Since the pastor usually accepts this responsibility placed upon him by society, he or she should be able to cope with his or her personal feelings concerning death as well as the emotions of others.

The sensitive pastor should understand his or her own feelings about death and dying for these reactions may influence how the dying person handles feelings about death. When the pastor establishes mutual respect and trust with the dying person, there is the freedom to release painful emotions involving remembrances, fears, hostilities and guilt. Often when the pastor listens and respects personal feelings, the dying person can develop or renew inner resources to face death.

The pastor who is sensitive to the needs of others can develop abilities to minister to the dying. He or she can utilize significant findings in fields of psychology, psychiatry and sociology. Despite the increased awareness of the other helping professions in dealing with the problems faced by the dying, the presence of the pastor was never more important than it is today. By bearing witness to a love

and concern which does not deny either life or death, but transcends both, the pastor is often able to assist the dying and to participate meaningfully in the death process.

The pastor should be aware that many dying persons are agonizing over their fears of the isolation, loneliness, and dehumanization in contemporary society. "Dying persons are not so much afraid of death as they are of the process of dying. They fear progressive isolation, and they fear being forced to go it alone."¹

It is very devastating for a dying person to feel abandoned or rejected, not only by those he or she loves, but also by God. Despite our knowledge of what isolation can do to a person, the trend in contemporary society seems to be for persons to die alone in hospitals or convalescent homes. Since members of the health care professions traditionally have had little or no training in the special needs of the dying, their temptation is to neglect or isolate the patient when there is "nothing more to do."

Hamilton directed a study of a hospital staff caring for different patients. Observers walked in hospital hallways dressed in hospital garb and used stopwatches. They observed a situation where there were two female patients approximately the same age on the same floor. One was recovering from surgery; the other was dying of cancer. When both call lights would go on for help, the nurse would first enter the room of the woman who was recovering, and often did not

¹Liston Mills (ed.) *Perspective on Death* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), p. 254.

answer the call of the dying woman. The observers kept a chart and discovered a noticeable difference in the attention the two women received. The living received more attention than the dying. When confronted with this evidence, the nurses denied it. They could neither deal with their own feelings of death, nor their bias against the dying.²

This study seems to indicate that members of the health care professions who have the closest contact with the dying often deny their own feelings of death.

THE PASTOR'S UNIQUE ROLE

It behooves the clergyman to develop a high degree of competence in . . . counseling. His profession is the one designated by our culture to help the grief stricken. He is the only person with the training in counseling who has automatic entree to the world of the sorrowing. This gives him a major responsibility and opportunity to be the bereaved person's guide through the Valley of the Shadow.³

The pastor can initiate action, while other helping professions usually must wait until the dying person approaches them. The pastor should be aware of this pastoral initiative.

The purposes which guide the pastor's concern in his ministry to the dying are not only the development of relationships, but also the striving toward an awareness of a built-in sense of completeness.

²Phillip Hamilton, "Death as an Aspect of American Culture" (Las Vegas: U.S. Air Force Chaplain Professional Development Conference, 1973).

³Howard J. Clinebell, Jr., *Basic Types of Pastoral Counseling* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966), p. 167.

A major fact of psychological significance is that many persons enter a terminal illness with a sense of defeat, failure and lack of fulfillment.

To seal off the patient precludes coming to terms with either commonplace concerns or past failures. It can also lead to a despair of love and a sense of hopelessness; thus, the pastor works on the assumption that even if a life has been uncreative, there remains a thrust to meaning and fulfillment. And this quest for meaning, for personal integrity and dignity in death, affords the pastor his best opportunity to serve the dying.⁴

Anxieties about death can often lead the dying person away from a meaningful experience with God. This can also be due to the pastor's reliance on quoting platitudes, hollow doctrines of faith, and complex theological statements. The pastor's presence with the dying person can remind him or her that a vital faith is within the context of love which is not destroyed by death.

While it may be difficult for the pastor to accept, some dying persons do turn away from the relationship with him or her. The pastor needs to be aware that it is not his or her responsibility to have any person respond to his or her presence. However, it is the pastor's responsibility to make his or her presence available. Perhaps the pastor can help the dying person work through this resistance to his help, if this seems appropriate.

THE DYING PERSON'S RESPONSE TO DEATH

Dying is an important event in the life history of the individual. Dying is a private affair. Each person must do his own dying. Birth is a social act, for no one is ever

⁴Mills, p. 260.

born alone. Dying is different. The end of life comes to each person as an intensely personal experience.⁵

In this single statement lies the complexities which confront not only the patient, but also pastor, friends, and family as they seek to share and minister in this most difficult time. No matter how well a person accepts his or her dying, there is still that private corner of the unconscious which feels the terror of the unknown and the isolation of the ending of life by death.

There are many emotions which must be worked through during these final days and hours of life. The dying person often experiences the whole spectrum of emotion including guilt, anger, depression, fear, anxiety, hurt, and joy. For this reason it becomes very difficult for a pastor to counsel with the dying person. Each day and each emotional response must be taken at the time; never hurrying, yet constantly aware of the little time available.

One important guide to counseling the dying is to treat nothing as trivial. Death weighs heavily upon the person, and there is a need to express every concern. Hidden within seemingly unrelated thoughts are the keys to opening up the underlying feelings during the dying process.

People die as they have lived; one cannot look to overturn the history of a life in its final moments. Insofar as a man gains personal integrity in meaning at death, it must stem from a coming to grips with the truths of his own blood. It is important for a pastor to affirm this.⁶

⁵Margaretta Bower and others, *Counseling the Dying* (New York: Nelson, 1964), p. 1.

⁶Mills, p. 260.

The tendency of the dying person is to deny the death, or to remain silent because of the feeling nobody will understand. In a real sense it is an avoidance which is a safeguard in order to be protected from further hurt.

To avoid an effective relationship because of fear and anxiety destroys the opportunity to talk with and feel the special needs of the patient. On the other hand, to over identify with the patient can create conditions of mind and emotions that threaten the counselor.⁷

It is a difficult task to minister to the dying person and the family, but the risks must be taken. Communication becomes a vital necessity; otherwise, isolation and loneliness become the companion to the dying.

The role of the pastor is one who tries to bring meaning to death in accord with the person's meaning for life, so that the act of dying is not separated from life, but is rather a continuation of the mode and manner of living. Thus the counselor's role with the patient is not merely that of bringing peace, but also meaning and order to the events that are experienced.⁸

This would be true both for the living and the dying for one cannot expect to find meaning in death if that person feels there is no purpose in living. One of the great tragedies of modern society is the high suicide rate of youth who see no meaning in their lives. A lack of understanding of one's death can destroy many things including relationships and feelings for others.

The counselor would try to keep the patient from feeling separated and alone in his final act of the human drama. But as expected in the therapeutic process, it is important to grow, to

⁷Bowers, p. 5.

⁸Ibid., p. 8.

expand the personality, so that not only is the patient helped, but also the bereaved family, which is sustained by the insight of the patient.⁹

THE USE OF SUPPORTIVE COUNSELING

There are some counseling methods which are useful to the pastor as he or she works with the dying and the family. Some of the methods available to the pastor are short-term counseling, crisis counseling, and supportive counseling. Reliance on these methods should not replace personal sensitivity to the dying person's need. The pastor should not remain aloof from feelings which the person expresses. Whenever counseling becomes a tool for achieving an objective without sensitivity by the pastor, then the dying person is not helped. Combined with sensitivity, these methods help open new doors which facilitate expressions of repressed feelings or bring to awareness the need for unfinished business to ensure mature and healthy attitudes.

Clinebell discusses supportive counseling as a valuable tool in which the pastor uses

those counseling methods which stabilize, undergird, nurture, motivate or guide troubled persons enabling them to handle their problems and relationships more constructively within whatever limits are imposed by their personality, resources and circumstances.¹⁰

Basic methods for supportive counseling are:

1. Gratifying dependency needs. The supportive counselor is a 'good parent' figure upon whom the parishioner can lean.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Clinebell, p. 139.

2. Emotional catharsis. Acceptance of a person's burdensome feelings is one of the most supportive things a counselor can do.
3. Objective review of the stress situation. Allowing a person to gain objectivity, view his problem with wider perspective, and explore feasible alternatives.
4. Aiding the ego defense. Methodologically, this is the opposite of uncovering, confronting or probing.
5. Changing the life situation. To change the circumstances, (physical, economic, or interpersonal) which are producing debilitating disturbances and frustrations in the person's life.
6. Action therapy. When a person is stunned or paralyzed by feelings of defeat, it is often helpful for the pastor to prescribe some activity.
7. Using religious resources. Prayer, scripture, devotional literature, communion, etc., constitute valuable supportive resources unique to pastoral counseling.¹¹

Supportive counseling is relatively new in the counseling field, at least as a structured methodical approach. This method helps both pastor and dying person develop a new awareness for working through the crisis together and allows each to utilize the strength of the personality in coping with the life situation.

An important aspect of supportive counseling with the dying person is the pastor's need to develop empathy.

Empathy is the feeling, or the thinking of one personality into another, until some state of identification is achieved. In this identification, real understanding between people can take place; without it, in fact no understanding is possible.¹²

¹¹Ibid., pp. 141-144.

¹²Rollo May, *The Art of Counseling* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967), p. 77.

After empathy has been established with the pastor, the dying person is then free to focus on the here and now problems of living.

TRUTH TELLING

One of the areas of concern which confronts the pastor and family with their relationship to the dying involves telling the truth about the person's condition. The question, "Should the dying person know the truth?" is often asked. Will it help or hurt the person to know the truth? Has the physician been honest in explaining the disease, and the chances for recovery? There are certain common agreements by both the medical and psychological professions.

1. It is generally agreed that doctor and psychologist want the patient to do as well as present knowledge of therapy permits.
2. It is agreed that the patient be given the therapy he needs for his recovery.
3. It is agreed that the decisions on therapy should arise from the knowledge of the disease and the person who has the disease.
4. It is agreed that both medically and psychologically the person is able to withstand the shock of dying.¹³

There can really be no conspiracy or hiding what the person already innately knows. This hiding of the truth sometimes produces more anxiety and fear than the actual dying process. It becomes a game which is played by the dying person, family, physician and pastor. The process of game-playing destroys the possibility that a working and meaningful relationship can be established. It often

¹³Samuel Standard, and Helmuth Nathan, *Should the Patient Know the Truth?* (New York: Springer, 1955), p. 15.

prolongs the denial process for the dying person. The pastor walks a fine line in truth-telling because his lack of honesty may only compound the patient's anxiety, loneliness and isolation. Yet, despite his own awareness, the pastor sometimes is told by the physician and the family to withhold the truth from the dying person. If a pastor finds his relationship of confidentiality in jeopardy, then he should seek the consent and understanding of the physician and family in discussing the seriousness of the illness.

The way in which the truth is told is all important. Sensitivity to the individual and a sense of timing should temper the truth. Truth can be cold and cruel, or it can be gentle, merciful and hopeful.¹⁴

The pastor should never usurp the authority of the physician in the prognosis of the disease. If conflicts between physician and pastor occur, it is the responsibility of both to talk through their misunderstanding for the benefit of the person. It is unjust to the dying person when he or she is not told as much about the illness as he or she can understand.

Aronson devised four guidelines designed to help the dying person share in the truth and, at the same time, allow the person a sense of individuality and identity to the end.

1. Do not tell the patient anything which might induce psychopathology.
2. Hope must never die too far ahead of the patient.
3. The gravity of the situation should not be minimized.

¹⁴Mills, p. 256.

4. Seek to know the duration of his psychological present, so you can manage telling him in such a way as to avoid idly waiting for death.¹⁵

An interesting study by Feifel revealed that the denial of death also relates to the physician's reluctance to tell the patient how serious the illness is.

Death to medical doctors is a dark symbol not to be stirred or touched--it is an obscenity to be avoided. Depending on the study 69-90% of the physicians favor not telling. In contrast, 77-90% of patients want to know the truth. Our embarrassment at looking at the individual faces of death forces the seriously ill person to live alone on the brink of an abyss with no one around to understand him.¹⁶

Kübler-Ross indicates that a doctor also has to undergo stages of denying death in direct relation to the closeness of the relationship.

Before the dying person can face death the truth should not be hidden from him or her. It is cruel to the patient if he or she denies his death either intentionally or because some well-meaning person wanted to spare him or her the agony of knowing.

Doctors when asked, tell that the patients do not want to know the truth, that they never ask for it, and that they believe all is well. The doctors are in fact often quite unaware that they have provoked this response in the patient. Doctors who are still uneasy about such discussions [death] but not so defensive may call a chaplain, or priest and ask him to talk to the patient. They feel more at ease having passed on the difficult responsibility to someone else, which may be better than avoiding it altogether.¹⁷

¹⁵Gerald Aronson, "Treatment of the Dying Person," in Herman Feifel, *The Meaning of Death* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1959), pp. 253-254.

¹⁶Mills, p. 255.

¹⁷Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), p. 4.

FIVE STAGES OF DYING

Kübler-Ross has described five stages through which many dying persons pass in their struggles to deal with illness and ultimate death. Even though there are other interpretations, these are the most concise and easily understood in their implications for pastoral counseling with the dying person. These stages are only insights by which effective counseling can be facilitated.

It should be noted that dying persons do not necessarily follow a classic pattern through the five stages. Some exhibit two or three stages simultaneously. Other dying persons may "skip" or appear to skip several stages. Regression to a previous stage may occur. But an understanding of all these stages will help a pastor gain a perspective of what the dying person is experiencing.

1. Denial

"Denial functions as a buffer after unexpected shocking news, allows the patient to collect himself, and with time, mobilize other less radical defenses."¹⁸ In those crucial moments when the dying person first learns of the possibility of dying it is important to allow him or her to deny until recovery from shock is established. Every person has this defense which acts to shield painful experiences in life. Great damage can be done when a pastor tries to have the dying person overcome the denial too quickly before the adjustment

¹⁸Ibid., p. 39.

is made.

There is also a danger in allowing the dying person to remain in this state without providing him or her the opportunity to move to a next stage of grief. Denial is manifested not only by the dying person, but also often reenforced by the family. In some cases the dying person wants to talk about death after the initial shock, while the family seems to cling to the idea, "You will get better; let's not talk about death."

The role of the pastor is often more difficult since he or she has both the dying person and the family to work with. In this stage of dying, the pastor should provide support and understanding in allowing the patient a period of adjustment. When the dying person is ready to talk about death, he or she generally will indicate it by either verbal or non-verbal responses. The pastor should be sensitive to these feelings in order to develop a deeper relationship with the dying person so there can be dialogue.

The dying person will indicate when he or she is ready to talk, and will terminate discussion when the facts become unbearable. It is best for the pastor to listen to the dying person's feelings which act as an "emotional catharsis." The pastor then provides the dying person with the feeling that an authority figure really cares about his or her inner pain, and is accepting of burdensome feelings.

2. Anger

"When the first stage of denial cannot be maintained any

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longer, it is replaced by feelings of anger, rage, envy, and resentment. The next question asked is 'Why me?'"¹⁹

This is probably the most difficult stage to cope with, both for the dying person and pastor. The anger is directed at anyone who is available. It should not be taken personally, but the dying person's complaints should be examined for clues to his personal needs. Everyone becomes a possible target of the anger--physicians, the hospital staff, the family, even the pastor. During this transitional period, visits become difficult because there is a sense of anger and rejection which only adds to the dying person's alienation. "The problem here is that few people place themselves in the patient's position and wonder where the anger might come from. Maybe we too would be angry if all our life activities were interrupted so prematurely."²⁰

If those at whom the anger is directed can take the initial abuse, it will eventually assist the dying person over this difficult period. Unfortunately, the anger is often directed to those he or she loves the most. If one can still love and accept the dying person at this stage, a deeper relationship of trust and love may soon be established.

Supportive counseling by the pastor during this stage of anger will greatly assist the dying person in recognizing that feelings are accepted. The pastor becomes a person on whom the dying can lean

¹⁹Ibid., p. 50.

²⁰Ibid., p. 82.

until he or she is able to cope with his or her death. The angry person needs a sense of love and support during this difficult period of grief, and the pastor can provide that understanding.

3. Bargaining

"The third stage of bargaining is less known, but equally helpful to the patient, though only for a brief period of time."²¹ While this stage often involves fantasizing by the dying, these fantasies do help maintain a sense of hope. Most bargaining is made in the privacy of the dying person's mind. It is a reaching out to seek a meaningful life even in the face of impending death.

The dying person becomes aware that bargaining cannot be taken seriously, but it can be used to help ease the continual facing of death. Someone has said, "We cannot look at the sun all the time, we cannot face death all the time." The dying person uses the same maneuvers as a child asking a favor of a parent. "Perhaps if I ask nicely, I will be given a few more days without pain or physical discomfort." Whatever he or she may wish at the time, the dying person usually knows that it will not be granted. Bargaining is an attempt to postpone, but it also has a self-imposed deadline. Most bargains are made with God within the dying person's mind. Unless the pastor is sensitive to the person he may never know of this stage, for it is usually unspoken. If bargaining is associated with guilt over unresolved feelings, the pastor may be able to help the dying person

²¹ Ibid.

see the need for expression and resolution of these feelings.

During this stage of dying, the pastor can use religious symbols to help the person through this crisis. The use of prayer, scripture and sacraments can bring a sense of relief to the dying person, and provide a feeling of support. These symbols of the church should not be used to bring false hope in the bargaining stage; rather they are a means to share in a meaningful way that he or she is not alone.

4. Depression

All the reasons for depression are well known to everybody who deals with patients. What we often tend to forget however, is the preparatory grief that the terminally ill patient must undergo in order to prepare himself for his final separation from this world. There are two types or kinds of depression --reactive and preparatory. The first one is different in nature and should be dealt with quite differently from the other.²²

When the dying person can no longer deny the illness, he or she begins the long process of facing all the realities. These realities may include financial problems, family relationships, or inability to function. There will also be some sadness. No longer does the dying person feel like being optimistic. Instead he or she is engulfed in a sense of despondency.

Reactive depression. This is the depression which results from past losses such as beauty or self-respect, or from losses of roles such as spouse or parent. For example, a woman who has

²²Ibid., p. 86.

undergone a mastectomy may feel that she has lost her femininity and that her relationship with her husband is impaired.

The key to helping the person through this state is the re-establishment of self-esteem. While this may be somewhat limited by the dying person's ability to function, the family and pastor should not take away all means of helping them to function. Certainly the dying person needs to be relieved of unrealistic tasks beyond his or her capabilities. However, the dying person should be encouraged to perform tasks he or she can complete such as dressing and feeding or doing handicrafts under the direction of an occupational therapist, and to be appreciated for accomplishments.

Preparatory depression. This type of depression does not occur as a result of a past loss, but concerns impending loss. In this stage a dying person is making the preparation for the impending death by slowly breaking off responsibilities and relationships. If done properly, the dying person moves to a deeper level of acceptance. This is done privately.

The pastor assumes a difficult role in counseling at this stage of dying. By his or her presence the pastor affirms a loving, caring and supportive relationship. This is the time when the dying person may request prayer and when he or she becomes concerned with things ahead rather than those behind. If the dying person receives too much attention from those who try to cheer him or her up, it may hinder emotional preparation rather than enrich it.

The dying person is leaving everything and everyone he or she

loves. If he or she can express this sorrow the final acceptance of death will be easier. This is the time for silence, simply sitting beside him or her, holding hands, or some other non-verbal expression of love and concern. While this type of depression is often hard for others to understand, the dying person often finds it necessary and beneficial if he or she is to find acceptance and peace.

The pastor can be very supportive to the dying person by realizing there is a drastic change of a life situation. The depression is caused by the feeling that life is incomplete because he or she was unable to live longer and because life is ending in a depersonalized institutional environment.

The pastor can provide the dying person with help in understanding the causes of depression. This can be achieved by working with the dying person to remove some of the circumstances which create the depression such as questions about family, spiritual needs and problems arising from the increasingly depersonalizing surroundings.

5. Acceptance

Acceptance should not be mistaken for a happy stage. It is almost void of feelings. It is as if the pain had gone . . . This is also the time when the family usually needs more help, understanding and support than the patient himself. While the dying patient has found some peace and acceptance his circle of interest diminishes.²³

At this time there is a need for reflection, a time for more intimate contacts with selected members of the family and friends; a

²³Ibid., p. 113.

deeper feeling and expression of love. The struggle is past and the moment of acting has ceased. The dying person says, "I am ready to die."

The dying person may not wish to see visitors, and noise and activity are distracting to him or her. At this time communication may become more non-verbal than verbal. The pastor and family may sit with the dying person in silence making him or her aware of their presence and love. There are few quiet times in a hospital, but an evening visit may be more reassuring than at any other time simply because it is at the end of the day. This visit has significance and meaning for many dying persons indicate, "The nights are so long."

As death approaches the family of the dying person needs the most help. The pastor can understand the conflicts of wanting the person to die to relieve pain and misery, and not wanting to lose so significant a person. Often the pastor can help the family select the person who feels most comfortable staying with the dying person and sharing the moment of death.

CONCLUSION

It is always a difficult task to help a dying person through this struggle, since so many factors must be taken into consideration. These considerations include the actual physical condition of the dying person, the stability of the family relationship, and the pastor's own feelings about death. The important aspect for the dying person, however, is to be able to maintain his or her sense of

dignity. While there is often loneliness and isolation, a sensitive pastor can help a dying person keep his or her self-esteem in the final days.

In order to accomplish this, the dying person should be aware of the fact that death is imminent. Unless the dying person knows the truth of his or her condition, there is game-playing by all concerned. This often only adds to the denial factor. The dying person should know as much of the truth as he or she wants to know, but it must be done as compassionately and sensitively as possible so the dying person's feelings can be respected.

"Dying persons and their families need others willing to explore, understand, and mutually share the growth process they are struggling with."²⁴ Kübler-Ross feels that the time to talk about death is when the person wishes to do so. This may be long before it actually happens. She feels that a stronger and healthier individual can deal with death better than one who is faced with it imminently. It is also easier for families to talk about the possibilities of death during the early stages while the person is still functioning and able to make personal wishes known.

²⁴Ibid., p. 276.

Chapter IV

PASTORAL COUNSELING WITH THE BEREAVED

The pastor's ministry to the bereaved bears much resemblance to his work with the dying. His attitude toward death influences his willingness to be with those who mourn just as it did with the dying.¹

In order to be effective in grief counseling, a pastor should have an understanding of what grief is, the stages of grief, and the needs of the bereaved person. The pastor should have some knowledge of the procedures that will help him or her work effectively with the bereaved person.

Jackson defines grief as "the intense emotion that floods life when a person's inner security system is shattered by an acute loss, usually associated with the death of someone important in his/her life."² Acute grief presents a definite clinical picture. Several contemporary writers and researchers have defined patterned reactions to grief. While they differed slightly in their clinical definitions of the various stages, all showed a high correlation of the physical and emotional symptoms they associated with normal reactions to grief.

¹Liston Mills (ed.) *Perspectives on Death* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), p. 265.

²Edgar Jackson, "Grief," in Earl Grollman, *Concerning Death* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974), p. 2.

FOUR STAGES OF GRIEF

According to Parkes there are four stages which the bereaved person goes through. They are, numbness and denial; yearning; disorganization and despair; and reorganization of behavior. These closely parallel the three stages related by Kreis and Pattie of shock, suffering, and recovery.

Most bereaved persons go through all stages of grief. How long each stage lasts varies with the character of the individual and the depth of loss he or she feels. None of these stages is considered to be unhealthy or abnormal. They define the progressions which occur in all kinds of grief.

Numbness and Denial

Whether this stage is called "shock" or "numbness and denial" the patterns are generally the same. Many bereaved persons have reported feelings of being unable to cope. Often the death is denied or not accepted, and many conflicting emotions occur to the bereaved person. He or she may even attempt to escape reality by collapsing or by being unable to make the simplest decision regarding the funeral.

No matter how drawn out the suffering of your mate may have been, the actuality of death comes as a shock because death is so final and irrevocable. Even though you may be glad that your mate no longer has to suffer, there is the feeling, 'If only I could have had a few more hours or days with him!' . . . Usually a state of shock takes over and continues for days and weeks. The degree of shock is modified somewhat by your own emotional strengths and the comfort given you by relatives and close friends.³

³Grollman, p. 288.

During the shock or denial stage, often there develops all the feelings which destroy the ability to cope--guilt, self-pity, anger and frustration mixed with grief. The pastor can help the bereaved person cope with these emotions.

Shock lacks rationality, and that is the most positive ingredient of grief. Therefore, if one can accept shock as inevitably complicated and frightening, he is facing reality. . . . How should he act? What should he do . . . ? Don't try to cope with shock. Let it be.⁴

Shock is nature's way of protecting a person from a painful experience. It is natural to have these feelings before a person can go on to the next stage of grief. This stage of grief has been known to last as long as a year in normal grief processes, especially if the deceased is a spouse or child.

Yearning

"Yearning" is characterized by an intense desire to return to the relationship with the deceased. This phase begins with the diminishing feeling of numbness and death. Parkes' study of twenty-two widows reported, "A variety of physiological disturbances . . . as well as self reproach, general irritability, or bitterness, a disruption of social relationships, restlessness and tension."⁵

Where death has occurred, the rhythm of life has been disrupted and the mourner yearns to return to that part of life which

⁴Bernadine Kreis, and Alice Pattie, *Up from Grief* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), p. 13.

⁵David Switzer, *The Minister as Crisis Counselor* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), pp. 149-152.

represents stability and security. The reason for yearning is that no individual can ever be completely replaced in the family structure.

Yearning may be evidenced by such a strong feeling of the presence of the deceased that there may be the experience of the actual presence. In Parkes' study of the twenty-two widows, he noted this experience.

Ten of the widows thought that they had heard or seen their husbands during the first month after the death, and sixteen reported a sense of the presence of their husbands near them during the first month. This was still present in twelve widows a year later. Twelve of the widows reported attacks of panic.⁶

While Kreis and Pattie did not define an equivalent stage in their grief structure, they also reported similar emotions in both their first stage of shock, and their second stage of suffering.

Disorganization and Despair

This stage of grief is characterized by apathy and aimlessness. There is the feeling there is no possible future. While Kreis and Pattie call this stage, "suffering," there actually is suffering in all stages of grief but it is more pronounced in this stage. They define it in terms of the despair about the future which so often faces the bereaved. "The suffering stage of grief is the worst stage of all. . . . It is such a personal emotion and so much of the reaction depends upon the person you are."⁷

After death has occurred and time has elapsed, there is a sense of hopelessness. The family and friends are gone, and now

⁶Ibid., p. 150.

⁷Kreis, p. 25.

suffering becomes more private. The feeling of guilt is a very close companion at this time. This is the moment when a person asks the most difficult questions about his or her role in the loved one's death, and seeks to place the blame upon him- or herself.

In this stage they may express anger toward the doctor for not doing more, the hospital for "neglecting" the dying person, toward themselves for not being available, and toward the world because a loved one has passed away. Suffering can be healing if it sets free the burdensome emotions which lie dormant in the unconscious.

Suffering becomes unhealthy if a person moves into a masochistic form of self-pity. To repress guilt and suffering denies grief an opportunity to be expressed in a supportive environment of family and friends. There is no set period for suffering, but it is the most dangerous if not allowed to be expressed.

Suffering is a time of depression and loneliness which only the individual can work through. Each person often goes down into an abyss of despair, searching, grieving, and questioning until he or she can be sustained through faith or by the supportive help of others.

Reorganization of Behavior

Parkes and Kreis pointed out that this final phase does not occur as early as commonly thought. This stage is generally characterized by "greatly diminished symptomatology, the opening up of the future, a sense that life has a good taste to it."⁸

⁸Switzer, p. 151.

Recovery is the re-establishment of friends and activities which begin to pull the pain of life together. The intensity of the grief depends upon the closeness of the relationship with the deceased, and recovery begins when the full circle of grief has been worked through.

Although recovery takes far longer unless friends and relatives have been supportive--during your shock and suffering, their roles decrease in activity with time, and the griever takes up the slack with his growing maturity and the knowledge that the challenge, the work, and the inner understanding come from within.⁹

PRACTICAL FUNCTIONS OF THE PASTOR IN COUNSELING THE BEREAVED

Most pastors develop their own style of grief counseling. There are many variations used by the pastor because of different circumstances, the limitations of the pastor, and the personal feelings of the bereaved. However, some specific suggestions can be made. The way the pastor handles contact with the bereaved depends upon whether they are members of the congregation or outside the church.

If the deceased person and the family are not members of the church, the mortuary contacts the pastor to conduct the funeral service. The pastor must then establish empathy, and provide the family with the counsel and support he or she feels they need at this critical time.

The pastor can use the following suggested procedure when

⁹Kreis, p. 48.

contacting the bereaved family.

1. Identify him- or herself as the pastor who will be conducting the service.
2. Ask general questions about the deceased person.
3. Elicit personal information (i.e., length of marriage, hobbies, work of the deceased, etc.) in order to have material for the funeral service.
4. Consult the family for personal requests for scripture, music, prayers, etc., and share the format of the funeral service with them.
5. Leave a phone number so they can call if there are additional questions or needs. Arrange to meet the family members before the service at the mortuary.
6. Follow up with a visit, if possible, or a phone call. A personal letter can be sent after the funeral service if the family is from out of the area.

If the family are members of the congregation, the pastor should make a personal visit as soon as the death is known. This call will generally focus on sympathy for the bereaved, and helping them with arrangements for the funeral. The pastor may ask many of the same questions he or she asked non-member families to complete the necessary information about the deceased for the funeral service. The pastor will also want to find out any practical needs of the family so this information can be passed on to members of the congregation. In discussing the funeral, the pastor can help the bereaved to talk about the deceased and encourage expressions of grief.

After the funeral, the pastor should make a call on the family. The best time to make this call is after the family and friends have gone, and the bereaved is experiencing feelings of loneliness. During this call, the bereaved person can be encouraged

to express painful emotions.

During the next few months, it is helpful for the pastor to check regularly on the bereaved person's attendance at church, and to ask close friends for any information about adjustment, and to provide pastoral care when requested. It is important to make several personal calls or visits which will give the bereaved a chance to discuss any aspects of grief he or she is experiencing. This pastoral care extends beyond the period of grief.

CONSIDERATIONS IN GRIEF COUNSELING

There is reluctance on the part of many pastors to enter into intense long-term grief counseling. Sermons must be written, meetings attended and other pastoral functions completed. However, the pastor can provide the supportive relationship needed in which the bereaved person works through grief. The pastor facilitates the person's grief work by using the basic methods of supportive counseling discussed in Chapter III.

There are times when a pastor feels that working with a particular bereaved person is non-productive. When this stage is reached, the pastor may consider what Clinebell says about blocked grief work.

When the minister encounters what appears to be blocked 'grief work,' he should encourage the person to talk about his relationship with the deceased, and continue to do so until the negative elements (which are present in every

relationship) are faced and worked through. By responding acceptingly to tentative expressions of mixed or negative feelings, further catharsis is facilitated.¹⁰

Abnormal Grief

In some cases, the pastor may not be able to help the bereaved person work through an abnormal grief reaction. If grief is abnormally prolonged or pathological, the pastor should refer the bereaved person or family to a professional therapist. Of course, the pastor should continue to show caring and concern to the bereaved person, and to be supportive in any way that does not interfere with the professional relationship.

For many pastors, it may be difficult to distinguish abnormal grief from normal grief especially in the early stages when intense emotional and physiological reactions are experienced by the bereaved. Later if the grief is prolonged, or if certain reactions are present, the grief reaction should be considered "abnormal." Lindemann lists nine abnormal reactions to grief:

1. Overactivity, with a sense of well-being rather than a feeling of loss.
2. Acquisition of the symptoms of the last illness of the diseased.
3. A medical disease, psychogenic in nature, such as ulcerative colitis.
4. Marked alteration in relationship to friends and relatives.

¹⁰Howard J. Clinebell, Jr., *Basic Types of Pastoral Counseling* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966), p. 170.

5. Furious hostility against specific persons.
6. Loss of feelings as if acting out life, not living it.
7. Lasting loss of patterns of social relations with general listlessness.
8. Behavior detrimental to one's own social and economic existence, such as unreasonable generosity.
9. Agitated moods of depression.¹¹

If the pastor feels that he does not have the time to handle personally a heavy schedule of grief counseling, he or she may wish to consider forming a group where bereaved persons can work on their grief together. A grief group is very useful in a church, especially where there is an older congregation with several deaths each month.

The pastor can also encourage the establishment of a study group on death which enables members of the congregation to explore their feelings about death. It has the potential of developing into a grief group giving support and understanding to the dying and bereaved.

CONCLUSION

The grief process is often long and complex. The pastor and the bereaved person must face the fact that a void has occurred and cannot be filled fully again even though other close relationships do help to fill this void. The griever must recognize that there will be loneliness and a change of lifestyle. With this change comes the

¹¹Edgar Jackson, *Understanding Grief* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1957), p. 168.

opportunity for growth, and while this is a painful process, the benefits can be rewarding.

Counseling with the bereaved is one of the most difficult, challenging, and rewarding aspects of the ministry. Through this relationship the love of God is literally expressed. The pastor can help bereaved persons to accept life and death with a wisdom and a faith that fulfills rather than destroys.

The pastor's task is to work with the bereaved as they engage in the quest for meaning. He seeks to participate as a fellow-sufferer in the bereaved's affirmation of life. His loyalty to the bereaved assures him that the values of the past were not counterfeit goods. The groping for a new self understanding can be encouraged by the pastor. And he can support the bereaved as they seek to come to terms with the mystery of death. Moreover, the pastor can be aware of the constant temptation to shrink back. He can encourage faith and not despair as the bereaved wrestle with old habits and dependencies.¹²

¹²Mills, p. 283.

Chapter V

THE FORGOTTEN CHILD

The child is often the forgotten person in situations involving death. This neglect plays an important part in the development of children's emotional responses and in their ability or inability to cope with death in later life. In recent years more counselors and family have taken seriously the dynamics of how children handle death.

While an infant can sense the trauma experienced within the grieving family, this chapter is only concerned with the child who is old enough to understand death. For a child to understand death he or she must be old enough to know:

- (1) difference between self and object; (2) difference between living and non-living; (3) difference between thought and action; (4) that no matter what has happened he is still loved and will be cared for.¹

What then does death mean to a child? Maria Nagy indicates there are three stages in which a child becomes aware of death. It is based not so much on emotional responses as upon chronological development.

1. The child who is less than five years of age usually does not recognize death as irreversible fact; in death he sees life.

¹William Lomers, "Death, Grief, Mourning, Funeral, and the Child," (Chicago: A presentation to the 84th Annual Convention of the National Funeral Directors Association, Nov. 1, 1965), p. 15.

2. Between the ages of 5 and 9, death is most often personified and thought of as a contingency.
3. Only at the age of 9 and later does a child begin to view death as a process which happens to persons according to certain laws.

It must be kept in mind that neither the stages nor the mentioned ages at which they occur are watertight compartments. Overlapping does exist. They do however reflect definite modal developments in the child's thinking about death.²

There is a tendency for adults to protect children from unnecessary hurts and painful experiences. However, this protective attitude sometimes creates greater anxiety among children, particularly about death, since they are aware of changes in the emotional climate of the family. While they cannot always verbalize their feelings they do express it. Unfortunately, this sometimes leads to disruptive behavior.

Studies of child behavior show that when the fact of the death is not well handled by adults, the child may be deeply injured. Often this shows itself not so much by what is said as by what is done.³

Death may have a different meaning for children, but nevertheless it is real and personal.

Children cannot and should not be spared knowledge about death. . . . All the emotional reactions a child is likely to have to death in the family can be considerably lessened if the child feels that he knows what is going on and that adults are not trying to hide things from him.⁴

²Maria Nagy, "The Child's View of Death," in Herman Feifel, *The Meaning of Death* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1959), pp. 81-82.

³Edgar Jackson, *Telling a Child about Death* (New York: Hawthorne, 1965), p. 16.

⁴Earl Grollman, *Explaining Death to Children* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), pp. 23-24.

EXPLAINING DEATH TO CHILDREN

One of the most difficult tasks facing a bereaved person is explaining the death to a child. The anxieties of a parent invariably surface when trying to share feelings with the child; thus it becomes very difficult if not impossible to hide grief. It should be remembered that a child will often react more to what an adult does than to what is said, so it is important to be as honest and open in the expression of feelings as possible to avoid further confusions and doubts. While an adult will want to avoid hysteria, he or she should not deny grief.

It is important for adults to be honest, no matter how undeveloped or immature their own beliefs and attitudes may appear. . . . The most worthwhile method of teaching children about death consists in allowing them to talk freely and ask their own questions without any adult speeches or philosophical non-answers.⁵

The difficulty arises with adults in their explanations of death to children because they don't know what to say. There are a few helpful guidelines:

1. Do not tell a child what he is incapable of understanding.
2. Do not be evasive to their questions.
3. Do not explain death in philosophical or large words. Keep it simple.
4. Do not make statements which are untrue or cannot be fulfilled.
5. Do not make a child guilty for his questions or to those events which surround the death.⁶

⁵Robert Kavanaugh, *Facing Death* (Los Angeles: Nash, 1972), p. 133.

⁶Grollman, p. 6.

Often the questions children ask do not reflect their real feelings, but the answers may enable them to respond appropriately to death. When answering a child's questions the adult needs to understand the meaning of the question. Some adults are inclined to give answers which they do not believe or accept such as: "Grandma is in heaven"; "God has taken Daddy away to be with him"; "Mommy is asleep." Sometimes the answers are more frightening than the death itself. It is not uncommon for a child to be afraid to go to sleep for fear he or she will die too. It is best to be honest and truthful and admit that an adult does not always have all the answers. The adult can then indicate that he or she will explore the answer together with the child.

THE MEANING OF DEATH TO CHILDREN

Perhaps one of the greatest crises in the life of a child is the death of a parent. Never again will the world be as secure a place as it was before. The familiar design of family life is completely disrupted. The child suffers not only the loss of a parent, but is deprived of the attention he needs at a time when he craves that extra reassurance that he is loved and will be cared for.⁷

The popular but psychologically unsound children's prayer gives an important insight to a child's fear of death--"If I should die before I wake!" is followed by the blessings of persons at the end of the prayer. Children are often taught this prayer by parents who fail to understand the negative affect it may have if the child experiences a loss.

⁷Ibid., p. 15.

There is a law known as Talion law which is, "To think a thing is to do that thing, or to do a thing is to insure an equal or similar punishment to the self."⁸ This law can have a direct bearing on the guilt and fears of children, particularly if they had a fight with a friend, sibling, or parent and subsequently that person dies. ("I wish a person dead, that person dies; therefore I will receive an equal or similar punishment to myself.")

The child's concept of death is not a simple thing, but is rather a composite of contradictory paradoxes. First, death is not conceived as a possibility in relationship to the self; but conversely, if strong adults die, how can a weaker child survive? Secondly, death is never conceived of as resulting from chance or natural happenings. Causation is personified and the child feels guilt subsequent to death.⁹

CHILDREN AND THE FUNERAL

The pastor is often asked how a child should be told that a family member has died, and whether that child should attend the funeral. In most cases, the pastor will want to talk individually with the child so he or she can help the child express feelings about the death. There are some important things which the pastor may consider:

1. Sometimes attitudes are more important than words.
2. Try to talk to the child before the need arises.
3. Begin to relate at the child's level of understanding.

⁸Charles Whal, "The Fear of Death," in Robert Fulton, *Death and Identity* (New York: Wiley, 1965), p. 63.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 63-64.

4. Let the child talk about his feelings.
5. Try to answer all questions at their level of understanding and comprehension.
6. Always be available to the child.¹⁰

If possible the pastor should counsel with family members before death occurs so that a rapport is established. Then a child who sees other family members dealing with death in a supportive atmosphere may be less inclined to avoid his or her own feeling and feel free to express them to other members of the family. The emotional growth of the child requires the successful handling of the reactions to the loss in the family.

The wise management of grief in children as well as in adults revolves around two major factors; one, the encouragement and facilitation of the normal mourning process; and two, the prevention of delayed or distorted grief responses. In our society, the funeral possesses the potential to compel the individual to acknowledge his loss.¹¹

Most studies indicate that a young child is not afraid of dying as much as he or she is afraid of being alone. Whenever a child is excluded from family participation, loneliness is manifested in fear and anxieties. Like adults, children have ways of living through grief and need to express it in the context of love and understanding.

Should a child attend the funeral service? In general children should do anything adults do in their grief work if they are emotionally able. If children do not attend the funeral, the environment should be emotionally supportive so they do not feel alienated from an obviously significant event in the family life. There are some basic

¹⁰Lomers, p. 19.

¹¹Grollman, p. xiv.

guarantees a child should have:

1. Going to the funeral or staying at home should not be blown out of proportion, never into punishment, or clear evasion of their needs.
2. Children need to be heard and their opinions respected.
3. They have a right to honest explanations of what is going on and why they attend or stay at home from the funeral service.
4. As much as maturity and age warrant, children should have some input into the decision to attend or remain at home.¹²

There is another factor which will help a child in the expression of grief. Whenever possible, his or her opinion should be respected in helping the family make decisions and arrangements before, during, and after the funeral service. This indicates that the child is a full participating member in the family decision making process.

To deny children the chance to participate in important family events is to deny them important opportunities for therapeutic communication. It is through rites and rituals and ceremonies that people work through their feelings. While no child should be forced to participate, it would be wise to offer the opportunities that would be relevant to his needs.¹³

Adults cannot protect themselves from death--neither can they protect their children. The traumatic experiences of life belong to both adults and children.

Tragedy is the gift to all--where can one turn in tragedy if no one understands or will admit that there is a tragedy? But if tragedy can be admitted, we shall find our comfort in what we mean to each other. . . . We reap from the depth of our own understanding and the genuineness of our own love. The child who is understood and loved can himself give understanding and love now and throughout life.¹⁴

¹²Kavanaugh, p. 138.

¹³Grollman, p. xiv.

¹⁴Ibid., p. ix.

CONCLUSION

The pastor who counsels with a bereaved family and with children has a dual role. At the same time the pastor is helping the surviving adults with their grief work, he or she should pay special attention to the needs of the child.

The pastor may want to counsel with the child individually, answering questions as openly and completely as possible at the child's level of understanding. Often the child can be encouraged to face his or her fears about death and to grow in understanding and strength through the experience.

The pastor can help the surviving adults with formulating answers to the child's questions about death. He or she can encourage the adults to share their grief with the child and not to isolate the child from what is happening.

Through family interaction the process of recovery from grief can be facilitated by the sensitive pastor. In many cases the pastor can help the family members come together as a group and share their feelings of loss and role adjustments which must be made in the future. By this sharing of grief and caring, the child can go through the painful experience and, hopefully, emerge a stronger person.

Chapter VI

THE FUNERAL: NECESSARY OR OBSOLETE?

rites of passage

The symbols of a religious tradition can touch deep levels of the psyche, renewing feelings of trust which alone enables a person to handle his existential anxiety constructively. External anxiety--the threat of non-being--is present in all crises. Many religious traditions have 'rites of passage' in which the hazardous transition phase of human development are recognized by rituals which serve to reduce the anxiety or give the resources to cope with it. Baptism, confirmation, marriage and funeral rituals are examples of such rites.¹

Van Gennep observed that there are several common patterns and ceremonies which help bind individual and cultural life to a common experience. These rituals make the transition from one stage of life to another more acceptable.

Van Gennep saw these rites as having three major phases:

"(1) Separation of a former state; (2) Transition to a new state; (3) Incorporation into that new state."² He cautioned, however, that the funeral service in particular was not typical because it was influenced by religious beliefs about life after death. The primitive funeral ceremonies may be ritualistic ways of guarding the living from the hostility of the dead spirit. According to Warner, the rites of

¹Howard J. Clinebell, Jr., *Basic Types of Pastoral Counseling* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966), p. 167.

²Paul Irion, *The Funeral--Vestige or Value?* (Nashville: Parthenon Press, 1966), p. 92.

separation have become a major factor in the funeral observance.

The funeral or rite de passage . . . symbolically translates the body from the world of the living to that of the dead and helps to re-establish the relations of living members of the group to each other and to the memory of the dead.³

Thus, Warner believes that the funeral contains certain values which are being sought by society. These values are symbolized in the funeral service.

CHANGING SOCIAL CUSTOMS

The funeral can be a way in which the bereaved restructures his or her relationship to the deceased. The bereaved faces changes in life style because of death. Therefore, the mourning process is a part of this transition. This period of transition was much more apparent in the past when there was a formal time of mourning, including distinctive mourning dress and standardized behavior denoting bereavement.

Modern American social practices no longer include such a pattern. The year of mourning is no longer observed. Members of the family and friends return to their normal routine of work and other daily activities within a few days after the funeral. This failure to express grief or to work through the grief process tends to deny the reality of death.

Death for the modern man is not the wages of sin, but the results of an accident or negligence. It is a disease for which we will soon have a cure. In the meantime he chooses to disguise death and pretend it is not the basic condition of life.⁴

³Ibid., p. 94.

⁴Liston Mills (ed.) *Perspectives on Death* (Nashville:

The denial of death and the lack of formal mourning rituals is growing and parallels other significant changes in the culture. Some of these reasons can be noted in the breakdown of established values, the growing number of young people who are turning away from old customs, the rootlessness and mobility of the population, and the fact that large numbers of persons no longer are affiliated with any religious body.

A hundred years ago in America, it was common for almost every household to experience the death of a member. The dying were cared for at home, and when death came, the family was responsible for the care and preparation of the body for burial. In contemporary America this is no longer the custom, and the deceased is taken from the hospital or nursing home to the more impersonal atmosphere of the mortuary for the funeral.

There is much criticism about mortuary practices and their methods of handling death. This criticism of the mortuary is best stated by Jessica Mitford in her book, *The American Way of Death*, "The funeral industry's chief goal (after making money) is to disguise the fact of death."⁵

Many contemporary funeral services are based upon a denial of death through the vocabulary which is used. Because it is difficult for some to speak of death, a whole new vocabulary has developed

Abingdon Press, 1969), p. 270.

⁵Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963), p. 6.

(i.e., "He is asleep," "Resting," "Spirit leaves," "At peace," or "Is not dead"). This denial is re-enforced by the mortuary which furnishes the necessary cosmetic techniques of disguising death by making the corpse look as though asleep.

Evelyn Waugh describes the funeral practices in America in his novel, *The Loved One*. "Cadavers are embalmed, painted, and made objects of ridiculous pomp that has nothing in common with the honor Christianity traditionally accorded the mortal remains of a soul considered immortal."⁶

To further this masquerade of death, the mortician has gone to great lengths to dress the corpse stylishly, placed it in a casket which is elegantly styled to withstand the decaying caused by nature. The mortuary services are designed to convey a sense of the denial of death through language and the lulling pleasure of repose in a comfortable slumber room, eulogized in an ornate chapel, and transported by a Cadillac coach to a beautifully landscaped cemetery where the casket is placed in a cement vault. The open grave is masked by a carpet of artificial grass or an embankment of flowers.⁷

Jackson indicates four reasons for the apparent breakdown of current attitudes toward the funeral practices in contemporary society.

1. The subtle and pervasive intrusion of secular values into the individual and group behavior of our culture.
2. The contrasting judgment of those who provide services to the families at the time of death.
3. The prevalent outmoded philosophy by which man looks at himself. His dependence upon technology and his faith in science and its ability to solve all problems move him away from his contemplation of himself as a mortal being.

⁶Evelyn Waugh, *The Loved One* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1948), p. 30.

⁷Mitford, p. 8.

4. The remoteness of scientific inquiry from the emotion.⁸

Contemporary society is moving away from the historical religious emphasis and purposes of the funeral service. This tends to indicate that many persons prefer to have a more impersonal funeral service. The funeral as a "rite of passage" is performed in a special order reminding the mourners that there is purpose and stability. It reminds them that a life has been completed and reaffirms the social character of human existence. The funeral reaffirms the values of life and the stability of the community as it directs future living toward these values. This has not been achieved in contemporary society because of the lack of understanding and education of what the funeral represents. Gladstone made a provocative statement about death as it affects the values of a culture.

Show me the manner in which a nation or community cares for its dead and I will measure with mathematical exactness the character of its people, their respect for the laws of the land, and their loyalty to high ideals.⁹

Each death is not only a personal experience, but a community experience too. While the personal grief is recognized and acknowledged in a ritualistic way, the community is also attesting to its solidarity and stability.

There is a tendency for the pastor to abdicate some of his or her responsibility in educating the community to the necessity of a religious funeral service. This may be because some pastors seem

⁸Edgar Jackson, *The Christian Funeral* (New York: Channel Press, 1966), pp. 6-8.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 9.

to ignore the significance and importance of how rituals help persons to cope with the problem of death. The pastor needs to understand the importance of the Christian funeral and the dynamics involved in people's lives.

IMPORTANCE OF THE CHRISTIAN FUNERAL

It is not enough to want to retain the funeral just because it is a time honored custom. The Christian funeral is validated by the fact that it conveys distinctive Christian meanings. Foremost among these is the hope for the resurrection. All the Christian meanings of the funeral service rest on this single point. It is the means by which the Christian copes with death. It is the basis for the fellowship which sustains the bereaved. It is the foundation for the confident expectations that the mourner can be restored to a full life after a shattering personal tragedy.¹⁰

The Christian funeral can provide the opportunity for discovery of a deeper relationship with God. While secular society may see the funeral as a method of disposing of the body, the Christian views the funeral as affirming both life and death. The Christian funeral service is not only a memorial to the dead--it is a worship service for the living.

The Christian funeral seeks to meet the spiritual needs of the bereaved by the use of a worship experience. This is done through the use of traditions and rituals of the church. This provides the feeling that all persons are bound together in grief by the effective use of scripture, prayer and ritual.

The Christian funeral service should incorporate a reverence for God, the meaning of death, and the purpose of living. This act

¹⁰Ibid., p. 29.

of corporate worship in the funeral service unites the pastor, family and the deceased into a deeper relationship with God. Irion indicates that the Christian funeral might have these basic functions.

1. Provide a framework of supportive relationships.
The mourner knows that the providence of God encompasses the loved one who has died as well as the mourner who has suffered the loss.
2. The ritual conveys Christian meaning regarding death.
The function of the funeral is to provide a structure of meaning into which death can be fitted. The bereaved faces two great tasks: the assimilation of the reality of the death of a loved one into the meaning of present life; and the strengthening of the mourner to cope with the fact of his own death.
3. The Christian funeral makes possible the expression of feeling. The mourner needs to be freed to give release to the great variety of feelings . . . The Christian funeral must be shaped so that it provides openness rather than restrictions.
4. The Christian funeral is to mark a fitting conclusion to the life of the one who has just died. It may be thought of as a ritual of separation. It is also a ritual of transition, a benediction upon the deceased, as he is commended in the hands of God.¹¹

The Christian funeral has fulfilled its purpose when it offers the bereaved the opportunity to face a shattering experience in hope rather than despair. The Christian funeral should be an affirmation that life is still worth living, and convey a meaningful faith to the bereaved in the time of deep personal need.

FUNCTIONS OF THE PASTOR IN THE FUNERAL SERVICE

The traditional functions of the pastors are in conflict with

¹¹Irion, pp. 170-182.

changes in the social customs and attitudes toward the funeral service. In the past the pastor's function was well defined. He or she called on the dying, counseled the living, made arrangements with the mortuary and conducted the funeral service. He or she represented the church in the community, and provided help and support to those in grief.

In contemporary society the funeral service is often viewed as a formality for the disposal of the body, and the pastor only presides over this disposition with appropriate ritual. The secular person often no longer desires a religious service because the pastor represents a relationship with God which he or she denies. The bereaved persons who are confused about their own religious beliefs do not allow the pastor to provide a meaningful Christian funeral service.

The pastor is often confronted with the decision of how the funeral service should be conducted. He or she must take into consideration the personal wishes of the dead and the bereaved without losing the perspective of the religious importance of the funeral.

These secular views can create a conflict within the pastor concerning his or her own personal beliefs on how the funeral should be conducted. The pastor should not compromise personal beliefs or integrity in planning the service.

Irion indicates that the pastor should be aware of the trend toward a more impersonal service:

1. It is now the custom of paying respects to the deceased and conveying sympathy to the bereaved by going to the mortuary for the visitation rather than attending the funeral service.
2. The funeral focuses primarily on the family rather than on the larger community.

3. The funeral becomes more private than public.
4. The ministers are regularly called upon to conduct funeral services for families who are unrelated to the church.
5. Finally there is a widespread dissatisfaction with the modern funeral because of the big business connotation.¹²

The funeral in both its form and content should be designed to meet the needs of the bereaved by making it possible for a deeper relationship with God to develop. The pastor then becomes the representative of God's relationship to the bereaved, and the facilitator which provides the opportunity for this to happen during the funeral service.

A survey was conducted by Irion to determine the meaning of the funeral service. Pastors were asked to rank several different statements about the funeral in order of importance. A majority of the pastors placed the definitions in the following order:

1. The funeral is a worship service which bears witness to the Christian hope in the resurrection.
2. The funeral is a worship service in which God is praised and thanked for the blessings of life.
3. The funeral is a worship service in which God's gracious help is sought in a time of crisis.
4. The funeral is a gathering of a concerned community of friends, neighbors and family to manifest shared sorrow.
5. The funeral is a means of commemorating the life of one who has been known and loved.
6. The funeral is a service to lend a fitting conclusion to life.
7. The funeral is a ceremonial means for disposing of a dead body with dignity and propriety.¹³

¹²Ibid., pp. 18-19.

¹³Ibid., p. 111.

The fact that most pastors identified the funeral as a worship service places an emphasis upon the Christian definition of the funeral. The funeral is undertaken in the context of a relationship with God and the pastor as its leader. This insures that a faith is fostered through the funeral, and is not an intellectual exercise on the meaning of life and death.

The pastor is the symbol of the Christian church and what it stands for in the context of the funeral service. The pastor represents a faith sustained by a caring God, a hope for the resurrection of the body, and a sense of continuing support in the midst of sorrow. The pastor provides in the worship service, "The confident expectation that God gives new life beyond the ending of this existence."¹⁴

CONCLUSION

Many pastors have failed to appreciate the value of the funeral service in the grief process. He or she has often used it as merely an empty religious ritual or as a means of presenting ways to personal salvation. Thus, the funeral can become a process for blocking the expression of grief. Some of the ways this blockage has occurred include:

1. Avoidance of expressing deep feelings because of the superficiality of the service. This is most often caused by the pastor not utilizing personal information about the deceased in the

¹⁴Ibid., p. 112.

service.

2. Using a long sermon at the funeral service.

3. Minimizing personal involvement of family in the details of the service. Some families have allowed the funeral director to have undue influence over the details of the service including time and location of the funeral.

4. Conducting a brief or formal service at the gravesite.

However, today, more pastors are emphasizing that the funeral service is a legitimate form of pastoral care which enables the individuals and community to express deep inner feelings about death and the deceased person.

If the funeral is conducted properly, the pastor can facilitate release of feelings of grief by:

1. Sharing a personal faith when confronted with the experience of death.

2. Recognizing the groups within the supportive community which enable individuals to feel accepted during the period of grief. Examples include church groups and organizations to which both the deceased and the bereaved belong.

3. Helping to keep the realities of life and death in the perspective of personal grief.

4. Helping to reestablish caring relationships between family and friends.

The funeral service should take its rightful place as a legitimate form of supportive counseling which enables the bereaved

to work through grief. It guides, supports, and sustains persons in time of great doubt and uncertainty. The Christian funeral establishes a trust in God that even in the midst of sorrow there is confidence in God's ordering of life and death. It is time to recognize the psychological and social influence of the funeral as a valid part of death.

Chapter VII

DEVELOPMENT OF A STUDY GROUP ON DEATH AND GRIEF IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

IMPORTANCE OF A STUDY GROUP

An increasing number of people are finding new meaning in their church life through small sharing groups. More and more ministers are finding a new focus for their ministry in developing group life. I see the best hope for church renewal in the small sharing group.¹

Many pastors are realizing that their members want an opportunity to learn more about the problems surrounding death, to express unresolved feelings about death, and to learn to face the reality of their own death. This can be achieved most effectively within the context of small groups.

The idea of small groups is not new in the life of the church. From its inception, the church used small groups to strengthen its community life. The early Christian church developed from underground worship services. These secret worship services were held to avoid persecution. Likewise, the early Protestant church used small prayer groups to insure freedom of worship. Today, there is the reawakening to the use of small groups because of the impersonalization of a highly complex society. There is a great demand to have the opportunity to share one's feelings and life in a supportive community.

¹Robert Leslie, *Sharing Groups in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), p. 7.

The church is uniquely equipped to provide this opportunity for sharing through its group life. Group activities are the normal vehicle for most church interest. The ministry and laity are rediscovering the unique structure within the church to develop an on-going support group.

The fellowship of sharing is combined easily with the discipline of study. The most natural way to introduce the note of sharing into small groups is through study. Church people are used to the idea that study is done best in a class and hence have little resistance to coming together in a group.²

Small study groups do not "just happen." There are certain dynamics which cause a group to succeed or fail. The pastor should assume the responsibility to provide the opportunities for a study group in the local church. One of the purposes of the study group within the church is to help members relate their faith and beliefs to daily living. Howe cautions the pastor about the futility of a fellowship which is devoid of any responsible study.

Discussion groups have revealed their poverty when they have not been informed by responsible knowledge; fellowship for the sake of fellowship becomes tiresome; and relationship without good discipline whether in the home or elsewhere becomes chaos and anarchy.³

In order for the pastor to initiate a study group within the church he or she should be aware of four basic processes which will enable him or her to develop an on-going study program.

²Ibid., p. 31.

³Reuel L. Howe, *Herein is Love* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1961), p. 83.

1. The average pastor in the average church can do much to enhance the ministry of that church if he sees the leadership of small groups as an important part of his role.
2. There are some dynamic processes common to groups of all kinds which can be identified to great advantage by any group leaders.
3. Small groups have tremendous potential for releasing the real ministry of the church.
4. The possibility of shared leadership in groups, used experimentally in some human relations training situation, may offer great promise for the future of the church.⁴

The study group has a life of its own, and may or may not choose to continue to function. When the study is initiated, it concentrates on a specific idea of study and should allow for personal development, support of feelings, and to enhance Christian commitment.

As Christian churchmen, we do not need to be scholars in religion, but we should be interested in the issues of life, open to new understandings, and engaged in some kind of reading or study that will keep us informed and intellectually awake.⁵

ESTABLISHMENT OF A STUDY GROUP AT ST. PAUL'S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Purpose

The purpose for forming this group in the local church is to provide the understanding of the dynamics of death on individual lives; to discuss the practical problems related to dying; to help persons

⁴Clyde Reid, *Groups Alive--Church Alive* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), pp. 28-29.

⁵Howe, p. 84.

cope with the trauma of death; and to become aware of personal feelings.

Importance of Study

Each individual must face death. There is a need to develop a sharing, supportive and caring community which enables persons to share common experiences about death in a meaningful way. The church can fulfill this need by providing meeting facilities, leadership, speakers and resource materials which can enable members to meet this crisis in their personal lives.

Structure of Study

This study group was held during the period of Lent for six weeks and met on Tuesday evenings from 7:30 to 9:00 p.m. The purpose of this study was twofold.

1. The group discussed a common study book written by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross entitled *On Death and Dying*.
2. The group examined the aspects of death including funeral arrangements, financial needs, wills, mortuary visitation, etc. The group used outside resource persons and materials which enabled it to become more informed about the dynamics of death and the importance of the funeral service in the grief process.

OUTLINE FOR CLASS SESSIONS

First Week

A. Opening prayer by pastor

1. Time to get acquainted
2. Sharing of experiences, needs, concerns

B. Introduction of guest speakers

1. Lawyer--Dr. Linda Stone

- a. Importance of wills, format of will, property, finances
- b. Legal rights of women and men

2. Funeral Director--Mr. Ronald Day

- a. Procedures with hospital, doctor, home, etc., when death occurs
- b. Cost of funerals, cemetery, cremation

C. Minister--Rev. Frank L. Arrowsmith, Jr.

- a. Importance of funeral, counseling the family, questions about death
- b. Christian beliefs. Death as it affects family and friends

D. Closing and evaluation sheet

Second Week

A. Opening prayer by member of group

B. Program

- 1. Sharing ideas of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's first stage of dying--Denial
- 2. Role play: Physician telling patient of impending death
- 3. Sharing feelings about death and the importance denial plays in death
- 4. Write out own obituary
- 5. Sharing the personal importance of life and death

C. Evaluation sheet and closing support circle

Third Week

- A. Opening with prayer by member of group
- B. Program
 - 1. Sharing Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's second stage of dying--Anger
 - 2. Each person to color, paint or model in clay to express anger
 - 3. Share in large group the question
 - a. Necessity to share anger--why?
 - b. What does anger achieve?
 - c. Can it ever be resolved/overcome?
- C. Support circle and evaluation

Fourth Week

- A. Opening prayer by member of group
- B. Program
 - 1. Discussion of third stage of dying--Bargaining
 - 2. Set up clothesline, each person to write personal problem and hang it on the line. Members choose problem they would exchange for their own.
 - 3. Discuss feelings of having another's problem. Would you exchange?
- C. Closing support circle and evaluation

Fifth Week

- A. Opening prayer by member of group
- B. Program
 - 1. Discussion of fourth stage of dying--Depression
 - 2. Movie, *How Can I Not Be With You?*

3. Discussion of the movie

C. Closing support circle and evaluation

Sixth Week

A. Opening prayer by member of group

B. Program

1. Discussion of fifth stage of dying--Acceptance

2. Functions of the funeral

C. Closing support circle and evaluation

EVALUATION OF THE STUDY GROUP

The primary tool for measuring the effectiveness of the study group was an evaluation sheet filled by the participants at the close of each session. (See sample evaluation sheet in the appendix.) Also, personal interviews with all the participants were conducted by the leader.

The first session was open to members of the congregation of St. Paul's United Methodist Church and forty persons attended. This meeting provided (1) resource persons to answer questions about the practical problems concerning death; and (2) an opportunity for a larger group to experience the purpose of a smaller study group and to make a decision to join. Both purposes were achieved. For the remaining class sessions there was an average attendance of 15 people.

In the second session, the study group was formed. During this session participants were divided into four-person subgroups in order that trust building could occur. However, their evaluation

sheets indicated they were not ready for the intimacy of the small group and preferred to remain in a larger group where "more varieties of experience could be known." With this indication that the group was basically insecure and unwilling to share feelings and experiences the leader chose not to divide into smaller groups.

After the second session participants indicated on the evaluation sheets and in personal conversation with the leader that his decision to use ideas from the study book together with personal experiences and feelings was acceptable to the group. This was the pattern followed for the remaining four sessions. During the last two sessions the leader became a participant which allowed other members more freedom in the expression of feelings and in the discussion. This method resulted in more flexibility as the group felt less dominated by the leader.

Positive Feedback

In discussions with the leader it became apparent that the members of the group felt freer to participate in the discussion after trust was built up following the second session. The last session was felt to be the best because each person felt support from the others.

The evaluation sheet was helpful in determining the techniques to be used, the subject matter to explore, and the usefulness to the local church as a teaching tool. Following are some of the participant's comments:

I feel the group is really opening up and sharing things they probably would never have talked about if this opportunity wasn't provided.

The class has made me more aware of the feelings of others on death. I feel closer to the members of the class. Also, I have made some decisions about my own funeral, will, etc.

Tonight was the best (last session). More participated. I feel that I can talk to others easier now about death, and when one has lost a loved one.

Negative Feedback

Much of the negative feedback came after the second session. The evaluation sheets indicated that they preferred the larger group. One person said that there was too much "religious interpretation" to death, and felt a need to explore a more secular concept. There was a request to present more of the psychological and sociological studies on death. Only one participant commented that the class structure was too rigid and felt more time was needed to discuss the topic. Many members felt that the sessions were not long enough. It took too long for the group to open up because of the time span between sessions and the addition of new members to the group. Most of the comments dealt with the subgroup concept which was abandoned after the second session. There were many favorable comments on the text book used.

I personally did not like the small groups. I hope the remainder of the class will be in the large group where I can hear all the ideas being expressed.

The book was good, along with the group discussion. It would not have done much for me if I had read it alone.

I believe the first session should have been the last session with the lawyer and the mortician to close it.

Writer's Evaluation

The writer felt the study group achieved its original purposes described on page 67. The book gave a common reference which enabled the class to relate their own personal experiences with doctors, hospitals and mortuaries. There was a new awareness and understanding to their personal feelings and problems in responding to the dying patient.

The class was small enough to facilitate good discussion and sharing experiences. The fifteen members of the group represented all ages in the church from the two youths in high school to several elderly persons. The writer was pleased that so many were interested in the subject and regularly returned each week for the class.

The writer felt some frustration after these class sessions; (1) realization that an hour and a half was too short for a full coverage of the study; (2) a week between each study session made it difficult to re-establish trust, particularly when new people joined the group; (3) there was no opportunity to present a follow-up study after the six-week session. Many indicated a desire to explore problems of "etiquette" of the funeral service (i.e., appropriate dress for the bereaved, questions of conduct, and problems of viewing the corpse). However, it was not feasible at this time. Leadership could be developed to present a class on this subject. The writer felt that it would be an interesting topic, and many persons would like to participate.

Chapter VIII

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to examine the function of the pastor with the dying and the bereaved, and the dynamics of grief in individual lives. The pastor has the opportunity through the use of supportive counseling and growth groups to undergird, nurture, and support persons in their search for meaning in life and death.

The pastor has been given a unique role in society to be the representative of God through the use of rituals, sacraments, and prayers of the church. Through the rituals of the funeral service, the pastor can provide the opportunity for expressions of grief and the affirmation of God's presence.

Finally the church can utilize its facilities, resources and personnel to educate persons about death. A study group in a local church can be the means used to provide the love, care and support of personal feelings and shared experiences about death and dying.

It is important for persons to realize the influence death has on each life. This understanding, hopefully, will bring a new meaning to their lives and a sense of dignity to their dying.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A

DEATH AND LIVING STUDY

St. Paul's United Methodist Church

Redondo Beach, Calif.

Small Group Evaluation Sheet

| In this Meeting | Circle one for each category | | | |
|---|------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Leadership was | Dominated by one person | Dominated by a few | | Equally shared |
| 2. Communication was | Badly blocked | Difficult | Fairly open | Very open & free |
| 3. People were | Phony | Hidden | Fairly open | Honest & open |
| 4. Group was | Avoiding its task | Uncaring | Worked fairly well | Achieved its purpose |
| 5. I felt | Rejected Misunderstood | No one listened | Fairly accepted | Accepted |
| 6. In a few words describe your feelings about the meeting. | | | | |

7. Remarks: